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Virtually, You Are There! Exploring the Teamwork Challenges to Swift Trust Formation When Working in GVT

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Due to the nature of the GVT work structure in which people are unconstrained by geographic boundaries, teams must also cope with conflicting cultural values and time zone differences. This factor creates many challenges, in particular with a group of people who are strangers to one another and has no historical background of working together. The main purpose of this exploratory study is to highlight the challenges of swift trust formation within GVTs and to present the teamwork-related issues involved in globally distributed collaboration. We conducted two focus group interviews to develop a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon based on the Tuckman and Jensen (1997) teamwork model. This data yielded important insights into the initial process of teamwork and swift trust formation. Based on our findings, team members experienced key challenges such as delayed communication due to time differences, misunderstanding of tasks assigned, technical problems with the use of varied collaborative tools, work attitude, lack of responsibility and motivation among teams and difficulty to establish relationships.

Keywords: Cultural Values, Global Virtual teams, Swift Trust, Teamwork

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of computer mediated communication (CMC) tools allows two or more individuals or groups from different continents, countries or states to communicate any time, from anywhere. Interestingly, scholars have employed the theme from *Alice in Wonderland* to explain the virtual team concept in a simple way; you are there (virtually), but not there (physically)¹. Concurrently with the growth of CMC, the typical work environment has been supplanted in many industries by the virtual work setting—the global virtual team (GVT). Effortless global communication despite geographical dispersion make GVTs an increasingly common phenomenon in organizations such as Microsoft, Intel, Kodak and Dell^{2,3}. The use of GVTs in such huge organizations is good evidence of the aptitude of GVTs for those working on tasks with co-workers around the globe; these team members have different working cultures and yet they must work together smoothly as a team. In a recent survey conducted by

Unify, 79% of respondents reported working always or frequently in virtual teams⁴.

Given the rapid emergence of the virtual workspace and virtual work structure, this paper presents preliminary findings regarding swift trust formation in GVTs. The purpose of this study was to explore and obtain an understanding about the teamwork challenges when team members are culturally different and yet they need to collaborate and work at a distance. We employed a qualitative method, conducting interviews with two focus groups. Each focus group had four (4) members in which the respondents were chosen to provide their perceptions, and insights on their experiences of undergoing the GVTs process and challenges in forming trust. We performed qualitative analysis on the data and then formulated two key analytic themes based on various cultural dimensions^{5,6}. The results identify several trust-related issues of teamwork based on two key challenges: communication efficacy and team motivation.

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2 LITERATURE REVIEW OF GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAMS

2.1 Defining Global Virtual Teams

Although GVTs are common today, there is no solid definition of GVT—it varies among different scholars. However, a number of characteristics of GVTs have been identified, some common and others less so. Basically, there are three key characteristics, which are consistently used in defining GVTs (that is, all authors agreed on them). These are: 1) when team members are geographically dispersed, 2) when team members rely on CMC tools to communicate with each other, and 3) when team members are disparate organizationally and culturally, yet work together as team. Several authors added one particular criteria: teams are temporarily dispersed and working virtually towards a common or shared goal^{7,9,10,11}. As there are more GVT studies, an increasing number of elements have been identified in describing the GVT concept. For instance, scholars, Horvath and Tobin¹¹ discuss the virtual team in general and compare it with co-located teams to observe their similarities. They agreed that both virtual teams and co-located team shared common criteria such as multiple individuals working as a team, task interdependence, shared work goals, and a similar organizational setting.

2.2 What is Swift Trust?

Swift trust is an outcome of ad hoc or temporary teams that collaborate on important and complex tasks over a relatively short period of time⁸. Trust in this form cannot be developed at a normal pace since the length of time the group is in existence may vary. According to Adler⁹, the formation of swift trust normally takes place at the inception stage of the project. Yet it is challenging to make this happen because the team members lack a work history together, is composed of culturally diverse memberships, and operate on complex, non-routine and interdependent projects.

Focusing on trust formation, trust takes on a whole new meaning in global virtual teams. Despite those challenges, each team member has to rapidly develop trust in order to maintain a good work performance²¹. A high trust development in a short amount of time prior to initial interaction is called a swift trust. However, swift trust is fragile due to cultural differences among team member in GVT⁷. By understanding the culture effect in swift trust formation in GVT, we will be able to develop intercultural awareness and understanding among team member.

2.3 GVT Advantages and Challenges

Studies have examined the effectiveness of GVTs in organizations¹³ and recommended several propositions useful for GVT management. The first is that the higher the required level of interdependence, the more communication will be initiated. In support of this, another study¹⁶, found that team members overcome

their individual differences better and collaborate more effectively when the task has required a high level of interdependence. Thus, these two studies demonstrate that effective communication and collaboration can occur, influenced by the interdependence level of the team's task. This effective collaboration formed due to high task interdependence is one of the benefits of GVTs.

In addition to the benefits GVTs offer to the organization and to their team members, there are also significant challenges to be addressed^{7, 17, 18, 19}. The most obvious challenges are lack of non-verbal interaction (e.g., tone of voice, body language), differences in language and cultural values that may affect communication and trust development^{2,10,14, 21}. A study¹⁵ has shown that the factors that contribute to communication breakdown in GVTs are based on five categories: 1) cultural differences, 2) interpersonal relations, 3) leadership, 4) technology and 5) trust. Additionally, the findings also showed that cultural differences within a GVT affected the team's performance, leading to poor communication and counteracting the benefits offered by the team's diverse composition.

2.4 Tuckman and Jensen Teamwork Framework

A teamwork model by Tuckman and Jensen²⁰ is used to explore and understand how swift trust is developed, from the initial phase where teams are formed through the final phase where the project is completed. In the first phase, "forming," members begin the process of getting to know each other. This is an 'ice-breaker' stage wherein members are strangers; they have little or no understanding of the other team members or of their past performance. Trust may be difficult to achieve during this phase. In the second stage, "storming," members may experience conflicts or difficulties in adjusting to their tasks. Team members may undergo a negotiation process in which roles, deadlines, responsibilities, and tasks are spelled out and a leader is assigned or emerges. At this stage, continued conflict can damage the trust that is beginning to develop, or a mishandled crisis can lead to mistrust. The next stage, known as "norming," is when team members evolve a clearer understanding of what needs to be done, when norms, procedures, and routines are put in place and conflicts are resolved. During the next stage, called "performing," teams become more comfortable; at this stage trust is fully developed and people work as cohesively as possible. This model illustrates the typical process of teamwork – i.e. how it is structured and formed. However, in the context of GVT, the process of teamwork and the challenges they faced may differ. In this paper, our aim is to fully explain the challenges as encountered by GVT members during the formation of swift trust based on the five-stage model.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Data Collection: Qualitative Method

Preliminary Phase--Virtual-Collaborative Team Learning Project. In this study, we conducted two focus group (FG) interviews with Malaysian students who had experience in GVT project (consisted of 3-4 members each). We use a set of qualitative questions to elicit information from the respondents. The purpose was to obtain a preliminary understanding of their first-hand experience working virtually with team members of diverse cultural backgrounds from 100 participating universities around the world (i.e. Japan, China, Brazil, Belgium, Italy, Pakistan, Canada, the US, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, etc.). Essentially, all the teams had a global experiential learning by participating over a period of ten weeks to develop a business proposal for multinational corporations. Each team was composed of members from five or six different countries, thus reflecting the cross-cultural component of the study. The online FG interviews were conducted via *Google Hangout*, a social media tool. With an interview protocol consisting of 10 main questions including several additional probing questions, the FG interview sessions lasted between one to two hours, which took more time than we had expected. The team members answered the questions openly and described their experiences in a rich manner, resulting in an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study.

For data analysis, we conducted content analysis to inductively identify emerging patterns of communicative and teamwork behavior related to the process of developing swift trust, as shown over the duration of the ten-week experiential learning assignment. We coded the data to find similar themes and then identify any related themes, which were not common across the two FGs. We developed the codes as we went through the transcriptions. In order to ensure we achieved a rich and in-depth understanding based on the data, we went through several iterations of coding so that we did not miss any important elements.

5. RESULT

In this section, we describe our preliminary findings regarding the process of teamwork formation and its challenges of working in GVTs based on the Tuckman and Jessen²⁰ model and swift trust issues. This initial understanding centered on two key challenges: communication efficacy and team motivation, with several trust-related issues (as Table below).

Table.1. Challenges of Working in GVTs

Main Challenges	Swift Trust Issues
1.Communication Efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delayed communication due to difference in time zone • Misunderstanding of the tasks to be undertaken and the roles assigned

2.Team Motivation

- Technical problem because of varied collaboration tools, i.e. WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook
- Work attitude toward group project –decline of motivation
- Lack of responsibility on group project-not dedicated and committed
- No past working history and fail to develop strong bonds

5.1 Teamwork Process of GVT

Overall, based on the teamwork model (refer to Figure 1.0), we found that GVT members went through all stages but much more quickly. Some of the stages in fact overlapped due to the GVT dynamics. For instance, during the first stage of ‘forming,’ team members exchanged introductory emails with each of the non-collocated members. Asian team members were surprised that some of their colleagues had engaged in a task-oriented process rather than taking the time to get to know them, skipping the relationship-building phase. In the introductory emails, members began to set the tone for how they felt work needed to be conducted and what communication tools ought to be used during the team’s work. For example, immediately after a brief introduction, Asnida said “...we discuss on using which communication tools, so we decided to use Whatsapp” while Shikin added that “... First week, we just communicate via email; introduced ourselves, asked for what time they prefer to have the discussion, mode of communication.”

According to some respondents, the early ‘warm-up’ session perhaps cannot take longer than usual as it needs to include a lot of task-related information to get the project moving. Each of the milestones needed to be completed within a short timeframe. The respondents observed that the first three stages were passed through quickly because the milestones were not far apart. They learned the ropes while experiencing conflict and confusion. Only after milestone 4 or 5 did they begin to develop trust based on established relationships, which enhanced their performance (stage four).

Others expressed their perceptions about the conflicts and challenges they faced over the ten-week project. Instead of experiencing the conflicts intensely only during the second phase only, they unanimously agreed that even at the fourth stage (performing), some members suddenly disappeared and fell silent due to decreased motivation to participate or a lack of interest over time. As a result tasks were not completed on time, a situation which was frustrating to those who were hardworking and diligent on the project. The ‘adjourning’ phase naturally occurred when the deadline was past. Some members continued to keep in touch, while others treated their time together as purely task-oriented, for the term of the project only without any further relationship.

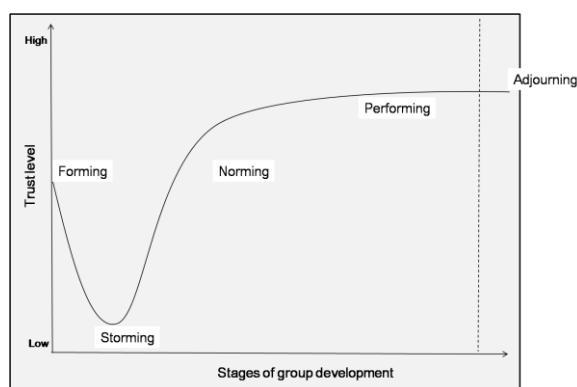


Figure 1.0 Global Virtual Teamwork Process and Swift Trust Formation

5.2 Communication Efficacy

The virtual communication necessary in GVTs can be challenging for several reasons. Team members mentioned several communication issues that reduced their effectiveness, such as delayed communication, misunderstandings, and technical problems. For example, one respondent from FG2 was frustrated when her team members kept silent and did not reply for weeks, then suddenly appeared in email only near the deadline. Some of the members did not go through the teamwork cycle in a gradual manner. They began with introduction—forming—and then straightaway jumped into the norming and performing stages. As Nurfida^{2*} reported, “It is very difficult, I think give up when all my team are very quiet, and they give suggestion at the last minute because the different time horizon that make it very difficult.”^{3*} Meanwhile, another respondent from FG1 stated that one of her team members failed to respond to her despite several emails, finally answering after two weeks. The lack of efficiency in communication is exacerbated when some of the set meeting dates were postponed, resulting in limited time for discussion about the project. As Mashitah said, “Sometimes our day of discussion will be postpone on the other days.... Sometimes it happen when we do not have time to discuss and we just finish our part by our self.”

Apart from delayed communication, there was also misunderstanding among team members (sometimes rooted in technical problems). Such technical issues hindered smooth communication among members. For instance, Rosnani, a member of FG2, expressed her dissatisfaction about her work being unaccepted by other team members. Although this occurred due to technical problems, she felt frustrated that her work was rejected. Consequently, her trust level declined. As she said, “However my trust level drop when they do not want to accept my part...when she

said she do not get anything my edited part but in my email its already stated ‘submitted’... That time my trust level....hmmm.... We had some argument.... At last it still the same.”

Technical problems also challenged the team’s communication efficacy. When team members had difficulties with the network due to weak Internet coverage, their communication suffered and miscommunication occurred. For instance, Delia from FG2 was surprised to discover that her work was rejected because of a network problem which prevented her submission from arriving on time. Similarly, respondents from FG1 and FG2 expressed frustration that technical problems caused varying forms of miscommunications with one of their team members who did not have access to the Internet for team discussions.

5.3 Team Motivation

The nature of a GVT requires members to work with people with whom they have no historical background in a dispersed setting using communication technology. Thus, it is important to understand how the team’s motivation affected the five-stage process of teamwork in GVT. All the respondents agreed that team motivation is one of the challenges of working in GVTs, since it is affected by trust issues, team member irresponsibility towards the group project and team members’ attitudes toward the group. As suggested by Tuckman and Jessen model²⁰, the members of FG1 and FG2 felt that team motivation seemed to decline over time. At first, everyone approached the project with high enthusiasm and excitement, in which case the trust level was perceived as high. However, between the next two phases (storming and norming) the level of excitement and engagement dropped and the trust level seemed to suffer as well.

Anita from FG1 said that she was labeled as inactive due to some computer problems that limited her participation in team activities. She explained the problem to the team members, yet it did not seem to change their perception. This rejection made her feel that team members saw her as not trustworthy or her work as not reliable. As she said, “There are times, I give suggestion, they are not taking it, then I just agree with them.” All in all, the challenges stemming from this factor strongly suggest that the basic underlying factor for swift trust formation among teams is efficient communication to ensure that members retain a high motivation and feel a strong sense of belonging to a ‘trusted circle’ of GVT members.

According to Maya from FG2, her group contained a ‘sleeping partner’ as well as team members who refused to respond to their email even at the beginning of the project. As Maya mentioned, one of her team members just kept his silence, and not clearly informing the members about his progress of the task

^{2*} All names are fictitious to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

^{3*} Statements are lifted directly from the interview transcriptions, thus no corrections of grammatical or spelling errors have been made.

assigned to him. Meanwhile, Aida from FG1 said that one of her team members always gave excuses for not doing his work; as a result the other team members had to take responsibility for completing his part. As she said, "Near to the end of this project, Taylor from Canada is always giving us excuses. Maybe because he didn't get his job done. So Famen and I had to work on his part. So my trust on Taylor is gone."

All respondents also emphasized the challenge of working with people with whom they had no past history. As noted, a GVT project requires team members to use several forms of CMC (in this case WhatsApp, Facebook and email) to remain in touch with one another. Some of the common stages of teamwork as suggested by Tuckman and Jensen²⁰ were skipped because they had to operate quickly. The participants also mentioned that over time the motivation level declined. On top of that, working with strangers for the first time can be challenging. Throughout all five phases, several respondents said that they had mixed feelings when they first participated in the GVT project. For example, respondents from both FGs agreed that they felt anxious as well as excited at the same time. Maya from FG2 specifically said, "...Worried at first. Because never had the experience to work with people from different continents before. But then it's quite exciting." Many of the respondents strongly agreed that the lack of a past working history made functioning as a team difficult as they had to interact with team members from different countries, with different cultures and communication styles, and communication was solely via CMC.

6. CONCLUSIONS

With the use of qualitative method, we also hope that our teamwork model will provide new practical implications. MNCs that desire to utilize GVTs as part of an innovative and competitive work structure will benefit in terms of theoretical data that will help them improve their GVT solutions and strategies. For example, MNCs must determine whether the cultural backgrounds of GVT members are homogenous or heterogeneous. Such knowledge will enable a manager to understand what is required for the global virtual cross-border team collaboration to be successful, because different cultures perceive trust and trustworthy behavior differently. Since trust is the glue for effective performance, the compatibility of cultures must be accurately assessed and action taken to address any potential points of conflict. If the team members are heterogeneous in nature, development of cross-cultural competencies is crucial.

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